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President and Founding Director

Voices of September 11th

Thursday, April 14, 2005

**“Grant Reform: The Faster and Smarter Funding for First
Responders Act of 2005”**

Statement of Mary Fetchet
President and Founding Director
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Testimony Before
House Committee on Homeland Security
Thursday, April 14, 2005

Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member Thompson, I am honored to testify before the House Committee on Homeland Security today. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss my perspectives on First Responder grant reform legislation. On September 11, 2001, my 24-year old son, Brad, died in the World Trade Center with the sons and daughters of nearly 3,000 other mothers. From that day on, Mr. Chairman, I felt it was my moral obligation to do everything I could to ensure that our government is taking all possible steps to protect our country. I consider this my life's work.

Shortly after my son's death, I co-founded *Voices of September 11th*. *Voices* began informally in my home in October, 2001. We held weekly meetings in which family members of the victims of 9/11 shared pertinent information. In a time of great grief and unimaginable trauma that support meant so much to those who had lost loved ones.

Today, *Voices* has grown into a multi-faceted organization that both here and abroad provides resources and support to more than 4,000 families, survivors, and others impacted by the events of September 11th. We advocate strongly for the implementation of the 9/11 Commission's recommendations; and we urge federal, state, and local authorities, and the private sector to join together to plan for how best to be prepared for, and respond to, possible

future attacks. Through our “Building Bridges” program we are fostering better relationships internationally.

I think of my life in 2 chapters – before September 11th and after September 11th. When I reflect on the past 3 years, I’m shocked by how dramatically my life has changed since my son’s death. Before September 11th I worked as a clinical social worker, and like most mothers, I was focused on the everyday needs of my family. I had no interest in politics and paid little attention to the political system. At that time I didn’t know that there was a threat of terrorism, and I certainly didn’t know that my young son’s life was at risk just by virtue of the fact that he worked in New York City. I assumed that, with respect to the defense of this country, the government was taking the steps necessary to protect all of us.

After September 11th, I learned that I, like so many other 9/11 family members, indeed like many other Americans, had been living with a false sense of security, and that my assumptions had been mistaken. I was thrust into the political arena and forced to understand complex issues and navigate several complicated bureaucracies. Much to my surprise, through my involvement I have become educated on intelligence reform, preparedness and other homeland security issues, and on navigating the political system.

Along with other family members and many legislators I advocated for the creation of the 9/11 Commission. *The 9/11 Commission Report* was published late last July after the tireless efforts of the Commission and its staff. Among its many important findings we learned that the attacks on September 11th were a result of systemic government failure. Those failures are by now well documented and I do not wish to dwell on them here. Now we must move beyond the problems of the past and focus on defense, prevention, and preparedness.

Following the publication of *The 9/11 Commission Report*, we joined a bipartisan effort of Congressmen, Senators and the 9/11 Commissioners to push for legislation based on the Commission’s recommendations. The sweeping intelligence reforms that the President signed into law in mid-December, 2004 are significant, but they are only the beginning, there is much more left to do.

One of the critically important issues that remains to be addressed is how Homeland Security funds are allocated in order to provide us the best possible protection. Mr. Chairman, regrettably, Congress has traditionally allocated

money to advance the interests of Members home states or districts. The way in which homeland security funding is allocated must break with this prevailing practice. As the 9/11 Commission wisely told us: “This issue is too important for politics as usual to prevail.”

The intense pressure on Senators and Congressman to bring home federal money is pervasive and hard to resist, but it must be avoided. Each and every town, city, county and state honestly believes that its own project or concern is valuable and pressing and demands immediate federal funding. I do not question the sincerity of such concerns, but we must insist on common sense.

Politicians are intelligent, capable individuals. But even if every single one agreed not to use Homeland Security money to fund unnecessary projects in their state or district, politicians are busy. They are in meetings, committee hearings, reviewing votes on hundreds of issues and running campaigns, among other things. There must be an infrastructure in place to allocate funds which transcends politics entirely.

Earmarking, pork barrel spending, working the system, lobbying – these are unacceptable ways of allocating Homeland Security funds. Having money allocated to First Responders impeded by unnecessary regulations or paperwork, by politics, or by any typical bureaucratic obstacle is simply unacceptable.

If we ask our first responders in high risk situations or high risk geographic areas to function within a bureaucratic system based on political maneuvering or arbitrary means, then we have already failed. It is that simple.

We have learned much about al Qaeda and Islamist extremists and what they want to target to spread terror: they want to cause mass casualties; they want to strike centers of national economic and political power; they would take delight in attacking targets of high national symbolic value; and of course they would like to destroy the nation’s critical infrastructure—our nuclear, chemical, and power facilities, our transportation and telecommunications centers, our food and water supplies. Thus, not all targets and locations are as likely to be attacked.

We know, for instance, that high rise buildings in cities are a vulnerable target. They are difficult to defend and difficult to evacuate. It takes more money to protect them and more resources to be prepared to respond. And the sheer number of people coming and going make it harder to stop

terrorists. Cities are at higher risk and should have more funds allocated to their defense and first responders.

We need to use brain power and common sense here. We need to protect those targets that are most at risk.

A pure assessment of risk must guide our homeland security decision making. We must strive for the greatest possible objectivity in determining where we need to dedicate our limited resources to prevent, respond, and recover from an attack.

In this regard, I wholeheartedly support the 9/11 Commission recommendation to establish an independent panel of security experts to develop written benchmarks for evaluating community needs.” (*The 9/11 Commission Report*, p. 396.) Such a board would be able to “prioritize” threats and make independent judgments untainted by politics. They could render their best advice to the Secretary of Homeland Security and to Congress.

Mr. Chairman, forgive me for my directness here, but our country’s safety is at stake, and it is my responsibility to speak with utter candor and honesty. To allocate funds in any way other than based on risk-assessment, would be to squander national treasure. Our leadership will be negligent if it does not set priorities and make decisions based on where the greatest risks lie.

If we do not do this right, there will be inexcusable imbalances in our homeland security: places will be protected that are not at risk, less money will be available for those places that are at high risk, and our financial reserves will be depleted. How could this ever be justified in the event of a future attack?

We must do everything in our power to prevent a future attack. If we fail, then we must be prepared to respond. There can be no compromise on these points. Politics as usual – on this issue – is simply not acceptable. The American people will not stand for it.

Establishing the 9/11 Commission was a difficult challenge. Against great odds it produced a document that is unique in America’s history. I have read the Commission’s report and re-read it. There is so much wisdom in it. Speaking on behalf of *Voices of September 11th*, I want to express my deep gratitude to Governor Tom Kean and Mr. Lee Hamilton, the Chairman and

Vice Chair of the Commission. I would also like to thank the Commission's remarkable staff for their accomplishments and dedication. Their ongoing participation in educating the public and continuing the national dialogue on the way ahead is vital.

We would do well to heed the Commission's recommendations on so many issues of 9/11. In particular, we must follow their advice on how to allocate funds to protect our country.

It is the solemn obligation of Congress and the administration, indeed it is the fundamental purpose of government, to protect its people. On this specific issue, as on so many others, the Commission has clearly shown us the way. Congress should implement that sound advice. I am deeply heartened by recent public statements of Secretary Chertoff who emphasized that the Department of Homeland Security will follow a risk-based approach in its policies and decision making. That same approach must guide the allocation of funds.

As the threat evolves, we must evolve too. We must learn to work cooperatively rather than competitively. We must learn to work on a bi-partisan basis rather than as two opposing parties. And we must apply funds based on "need" and "risk" rather than on narrow interests, political alliances, and deal-making.

On 9/11, my son Brad received bad information that caused him to remain in a World Trade Center Tower while it was under attack. This needlessly led to his death and the death of 600 others in that building.

We can never make such mistakes again; and we can never allow another 9/11 happen again. I think of my 24-year old son, Wes, who, just as his brother Brad did, lives and works in New York City. We must ensure that all our children who live in cities that are likely to be targets are protected from terrorist attacks. We owe them our very best thinking and our very best efforts to implement the measures that will keep them and all of us safe. This must include establishing and adhering to a system that makes the best possible choices about what most needs to be defended.

Once again, my deepest thanks to you Mr. Chairman and your Committee colleagues for holding this important hearing and for your leadership in protecting the country. I pledge my energy to cooperate with you and the government and I want you to know that *Voices of September 11th* stands

ready to assist in any way we can. I now look forward to responding to your questions.